

Apache offshore workers strike meets media and Unite union wall of silence

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On Wednesday, a one-day strike by offshore workers employed by oil and gas giant Apache shut down seven installations in the Forties and Beryl oil fields in the North Sea.

The strike by 160 Unite union members was sparked by a bitter pay dispute over an ultimatum to accept a “final offer” of just 4 percent. Apache’s US parent, APA Corporation, reported \$1.4 billion in after-tax profits on revenues of \$9.2 billion last year.

The strikers include electrical experts, production technicians and radio operators. On October 1, they returned an overwhelming mandate against what Unite described as “a real terms pay cut” for many workers. The walkout met a media blackout.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham is touted as a champion of militant action. But the chronology shows that, behind her initial grandstanding, every effort was made to prevent a walkout. Announcing the strike mandate, Graham denounced Apache for “raking in eye-watering profits” and treating highly skilled workers with contempt. However, Unite delayed confirming strike dates for nearly three weeks until this Monday, with talks at the arbitration service ACAS still scheduled for the day before the stoppage.

In an October 19 press release, Unite confirmed strike dates for October 21 and November 4. Graham’s attempt to maintain a militant posture was exposed by her pleas for Apache to table an “acceptable offer.” She assured the company it “could easily afford to resolve this dispute without even a dent in their profits,” seeking minor concessions that could provide a pretext for calling off the action.

The ensuing silence surrounding the walkout was broken only after the *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Unite’s press office, which confirmed: “Talks at Acas didn’t make progress to avert the 24-hour strike action which resulted in all 7 platforms being shut down. Strike

action is still scheduled for 4th Nov unless anything substantive happens.”

Before the stoppage, Unite acknowledged its potential to halt Charlie, a major North Sea platform, and disrupt the Forties Pipeline System carrying round a third of UK oil and gas production. But the initiative was handed to Apache for more than a fortnight to prepare contingency plans, while Graham accused the company of being “reckless” in “putting UK fuel supplies at risk.”

It is this commitment to industrial peace rather than workers advancing their independent demands which defines the Graham-led bureaucracy. Its “leverage” strategy is designed to ensure Unite a seat at the boardroom table as a partner in restructuring, including job cuts and hikes in productivity.

The struggle at Apache cannot succeed under the control of an apparatus that declares corporate profits sacred and isolates strike action it cannot prevent in order to grind down workers’ opposition and prevent unified action across the industry.

Unite officials intervened in mid-July to avert strike action by 50 workers on Neo Next+ Energy EP’s Elgin, Franklin and North Alwyn platforms after members rejected a below 3 percent pay offer. Five days of strikes were due to begin on July 17. Unite declared an additional £4,000 in annual pay and allowances a “bumper pay award,” claiming the threat of industrial action had forced the company to improve its offer. The union presented the deal as a victory, insisting workers had secured concessions without striking.

At the start of October Unite “hailed” a 9 percent pay rise spread over two years covering 70 of its members employed by EnQuest on the Magnus installation. Unite stated: “It is worth noting that there was no need for a dispute as EnQuest engaged throughout.”

The isolation tactics of Unite are on full display in the dispute against major contractor Wood Group on Harbour

Energy's platforms, including Britannia, Jasmine, Judy, Lomond and North Everest. Despite this involving what Unite describes as the contractor's cuts to pay and conditions "including fire-and-rehire notices," it has provided no coverage since before the two-day walkout on October 6-7, either on further action scheduled for October or the two days of action scheduled for November 3-4.

As for the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, its coverage runs to a statement on October 5, stating only that its members were due to start strike action the next day and that it was defending "hard won agreements". RMT General Secretary Eddie Dempsey was apologetic, stating "strike action is always a last resort," even as he described threatened use of fire-and-rehire, with the message ending: "RMT remains available for meaningful discussions with the employer."

Unite, the GMB, and the RMT lined up to defend their collective bargaining arrangement—the Energy Services Agreement (ESA) with Wood Group and other contractors—denouncing an unofficial strike wave by hundreds of workers in March and September 2022 across multiple North Sea installations. The three unions put out a joint statement smearing the demand for an industry-wide "wage revolution" as "a smash and grab operation grab job for short term gains we fear will only put the whole thing at risk."

The Apache dispute cannot be understood in isolation from the war drive that is enriching the oil and gas barons while immiserating the working class. The criminal US-Israeli war against Iran, the escalating NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the sanctions regime have disrupted global oil supplies, sending UK diesel prices to a record £2 a litre and petrol to £1.75. Households face a 4 percent increase in energy bills in October and a forecasts of up to 16 percent in January. Apache's parent, APA Corporation, is profiteering directly from this crisis, as are Harbour Energy and other North Sea producers.

The workers who produce the oil cannot be indifferent to the wars being fought over it. The Burnham Labour government is deepening Britain's participation in both conflicts—dispatching military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, repeating Trump's lies that Iran poses a global threat and pouring weapons into Ukraine. Every pound diverted to the military is a pound denied to wages, the National Health Service and social services.

Graham is an enthusiastic supporter of this war drive. She has been among the loudest cheerleaders for rearmament, demanding billions more in arms spending.

The same bureaucracy that is bottling up the Apache dispute is lending its support to the wars driving up fuel prices and bleeding the working class dry. This is not a contradiction: the union apparatus serves the corporations and the state precisely by channelling workers' opposition into safe channels while backing the imperialist policies that enrich those same corporations.

The struggle at Apache can only succeed if workers break from this apparatus. The union bureaucracy stands as a watchdog guarding employers' profits against any initiative and organisation by workers. It can only be removed through building democratic structures in which workers can organise an industrial counteroffensive linked to a broader political fight.

Workers must establish a rank-and-file committee to formulate their own demands and coordinate action independently of the union bureaucracy. They must link up to overcome the isolation imposed on each dispute. And they must connect their fight to the broader struggle of the working class against war and austerity.

The demands of the Apache workers can include a substantial pay rise restoring lost purchasing power; payment of all back pay; no fire and rehire or attacks on established terms and conditions; reject further Acas talks, make links with offshore workers across the North Sea for solidarity action.

The Forties Pipeline demonstrates the leverage Apache workers possess. The task is to use it to wage a fight that unites offshore workers across company boundaries, opposes the wars being fought over the oil they produce, and takes the struggle into the hands of the working class.



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